

A Sensitive Conversation with a Staff Member to Address a Referral for Support

You are wondering what to do in your role as colleague or boss when you see an educator struggling with stress who may need professional help. It starts with a sensitive conversation that explores the stress and what support looks like from the person's perspective. In fact, the first few times these discussions happen, you may not even discuss referrals. It is essential for a person to feel your care and support before a referral is offered. These tips will set the stage.

1. Approach the person of concern in a nonjudgmental way.
2. The tone of the initial conversation is important. The employee may be afraid to reveal their vulnerability or fear that they are being evaluated in some way. They may fear losing their job.
3. Meet with them privately. Emphasize that this is just between the two of you and is a **confidential** conversation.
4. Start positively by indicating that all educators deserve to be well and supported to be at their best at work. It's a tough job.
5. "I have noticed....(list behavioral signs of stress you have observed) and I was wondering how I can best support you."
6. Start with **open ended questions...**
 - Is this observation (my concerns) a good fit for what is true for you?
 - What do you need to be at your best at work? We all need to feel supported at work. What would good support here at school look like for you?
 - I wonder how your collegial relationships are going, and what might help might be beneficial from your peers here at work?
 - What about work/life balance? How might that be adjusted?
 - Teaching requires you to "be on" all the time. I wonder how you can get breaks or support throughout your work day?
7. **Listen carefully** and without judgment as the person describes what is happening for them. A strong emotional response (tears) or defensiveness is normal. Remain calm and compassionate.
8. Resist moving to problem solving too quickly, or advising. Being heard can be helpful in and of itself.
9. The important element here is to **explore the educator's view of the problem and helping them to come up with solutions.**
10. Ambivalence about seeking and accepting help is to be expected. It should not be seen as resistance.
11. Emphasize that there is no shame in taking care of yourself. ("You can't pour from an empty cup".)
12. **Offer open-ended questions** to explore a goal or a referral:
 - What is one thing you could do this week that would leave you in a better place? (Encourage them to choose something small and achievable that will send them down a better path.)
13. There is support available outside of school. Would you like to hear more about that? (Eliciting permission to offer resources before we give them is important.)
14. If you do offer resources, explore with the staff what they would hope to get from outside support. Address any worries or concerns they have. If there is an EAP in the district, share the contact information.
15. Ask if it would be okay to check back in with the person, and set a specific time to do so.
16. Upon closing of the meeting, affirm and indicate your respect for them for their willingness to talk openly and continue to grow as a teacher. A statement about your caring for them as a person and a professional goes a long way.

Responding to a Colleague's Emotional Pain, Trauma or Mental Illness

It is important that you have sufficient self-awareness, prior to and during disclosures, to discern your capacity for such conversations.

Goals:	30 Second Response you initiate example	3 Minute Response colleague initiates example	10 Minute Response you initiate example
Assess for risk of harm or suicide	<i>"How are you doing? It looks like you might be frustrated...?" "How long have you been feeling like that?"</i>	<i>"Thank you for seeking me out. You are really strong to ask for help. I'd like to hear what's on your mind." "It sounds like you have a lot of things to think about all at once. That can be frustrating and tiring."</i>	<i>"Sharing your feelings takes courage. I wonder if it would be helpful to talk about what you said at the staff meeting today. It concerned me to hear you say that you cannot see a future. Can you tell me more about that?"</i>
Listen nonjudgmentally	<i>"I am sorry you are feeling this way. What do you do to help yourself feel better when you are feeling this way?"</i>	<i>"Is there anything that you have already tried when you are feeling like this? Did that help? You are really trying to make things better for yourself."</i>	<i>Thank you for sharing that with me. Even though you did not mean what you said, it sounds like a really tough time for you right now. I want you to know that you are not alone...I'm here to help as I can and there are other people at school and in the community who can offer even more than me. Let's be sure you can keep feeling safe to share some with me and, if you are willing, to find a place where you can be transparent and get whatever you might need. Does that sound okay?"</i>
Give reassurance and information		<i>Sounds like you are looking for more ways to help calm your mind so you can think about one thing at a time." "I have heard Mr ___ share some good strategies with students. He might have some good ideas for you too. I could help you connect with him or go along with you. Would you like that?"</i>	<i>First, I am wondering if you have told anyone at home about these feelings."</i>
Encourage self-help and other support strategies	<i>"That sounds like it helps for at least a little while. If you would like, I would be willing to see if we can come up with some other ideas that will help too. Can we talk about it some more later?"</i>	<i>"I would like to help you when you are feeling this way at school. Would you let me know what you think would be helpful?"</i>	<i>"Sounds like you would like them to know but are unsure what to say and how it would go. Would you like to talk that through with me?" ...</i>
Encourage appropriate professional help		<i>"Thank you for sharing how you are feeling with me. It takes courage. Is it OK if I check in with you after you talk with Mr. ___"</i>	<i>"It seems like it would be helpful to have an idea of what to do next time you have these feelings at work. How can I help you out when you have these feelings?"</i>
Commit to next steps	<i>"Would you like to come to my room during lunch today? I will make sure that we can have time to talk then."</i>		<i>"Thank you very much for being so honest and sharing your feelings with me. That shows your strength. How was it for you to talk with me about this? I am glad you are going to try to talk with your family tonight. I will check in with you tomorrow. Is that okay with you?"</i>

Preserve the trust they have placed in you and the help-seeking process for staff at your school while at the same time looking for appropriate ways to connect with other services.

FOLLOW CONNECTION/REFERRAL PATHWAYS TO YOUR SCHOOL SUPPORT STRUCTURE FOR STAFF.